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### Mukta Project Holds Workshop with Local Police

January 12, 2007

**Officers and sex workers pledge commitment to HIV/AIDS prevention**

**Pune, India:** Sex workers and police officers may not be the most likely of partners, but after a groundbreaking workshop held yesterday by Pathfinder International, the two groups have pledged to work together in support of a noble cause: the fight against Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS.

The workshop was organized by Pathfinder's **Mukta Project**, which empowers sex workers to make informed choices and to adopt behaviors that will reduce their vulnerability to STI/HIV/AIDS. It brought together more than 20 sex workers and nearly 80 high ranking police officers, including all top level police officials and inspectors from 20 stations in Pune District. Objectives of the event were threefold: to enhance participants' knowledge of STI/HIV/AIDS prevention; to orient police to the work of the Mukta project and the role of Mukta Peer Educators among the sex worker community; and to work toward a partnership for STI/HIV/AIDS prevention in Pune District.



*Local police gather with Mukta peer educators and staff at the opening ceremony of this groundbreaking event.*

"The attempt to get policemen and the sex workers on a common platform is key to creating an enabling environment for our project," said Dr. Michele Andina, Director of Mukta. "With support of the police, peer educators can deliver important health messages, condoms, and clinic referrals to sex workers on the streets and in brothels. This will have an enormous impact on our efforts to decrease STIs and new HIV infections."

Due to the air of illegality surrounding the sex worker profession, sex workers and police officers have historically harbored tense relations, both in Pune and in India as a whole. Before the workshop, members of Pune's sex worker community faced the daily possibility of arrest or harassment, and a number of Mukta peer educators (who are sex workers themselves) had been arrested late at night while delivering condoms and important health messages to their peers on the streets of Pune.

Much has now changed after this event, which had such an effect on the officers in attendance that some even expressed a desire to volunteer with the Mukta project.

"This workshop," said one female officer, has helped me to get an insight into the needs of sex workers and to understand their daytoday struggles with clients, regular partners, brothel owners, pimps and the society at large." Said another officer: "I am surprised at the level of confidence the peer educators have to reach out to their peers with such important messages on STI/HIV, condom usage and health services. I am inspired by

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their work."

Active since 2004, the Mukta Project operates in 10 districts of Maharashtra state, and is part of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Avahan Initiative, which supports HIV/AIDS prevention work in six states of India. Mukta (meaning "freedom" in the local language) is spread across 65 cities, towns and villages and has established a network of 104 health service points providing regular comprehensive health services to approximately 10 percent of Maharashtra's estimated 20,500 sex workers, both female and male.

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